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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000022

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TAGS: PREL MARR MOPS BA IZ IR BILAT OFFICIALS
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES'
JANUARY 17-19 VISIT TO BAHRAIN

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) Mr. Secretary, we warmly welcome your January 17-19 visit to Bahrain. The fifty-year U.S. Navy presence in Bahrain is the centerpiece of the U.S.-Bahrain bilateral relationship. Bahrain considers the Navy to be its defense against external threats, starting with Iran, and has recently taken important steps to enhance bilateral relations further. Bahrain generally supports our Iraq policy but believes we should draw down our forces, leaving only a rapid-reaction force in country. The GOB wants the Iraqi government to shoulder the bulk of the security responsibilities and work more closely with its Arab neighbors. The Bahraini government hopes the U.S. Navy will initiate a process allowing for the return of dependents to the country, citing the deterioration in the everyday, people-to-people contact that family members previously had with Bahrainis. Your trip closely follows Secretary of the Navy Winter's late November visit and Chief of Naval Operations Mullen's late December visit.

Objectives

¶2. (C) What we want from the visit:

-- Public expression of support for U.S. policy in Iraq and a commitment, along with that of its fellow GCC member states, for pro-active Bahraini engagement with Iraq's leadership.

-- Close coordination on Iran policy and development of strategies that go beyond sanctions contained in UNSCR 1737.

-- Continued cooperation on regional maritime operations, including in Combined Task Forces (CTF) 150 and 152 in and around the Gulf.

Issues of Interest to Bahrain

¶3. (C) The Bahrainis will want to hear from you on:

-- A reaffirmation of the Navy's long-term commitment to Bahrain and a status update on the possible return of Navy dependents.

-- A briefing on the way forward in Iraq, with particular emphasis on the Iraqi government's responsibilities and ways the GCC can engage and assist.

-- Strategies to contain Iran while avoiding a military

confrontation.

Key Issues to Raise

¶4. (C) We suggest you raise the following points:

-- Recognize the long history of mil-mil cooperation with Bahrain, most notably through hosting NAVCENT. Reaffirm the commitment of the U.S. Navy in Bahrain.

-- Praise Bahrain's support for OEF, OIF, and U.S. policy on Iraq and Iran. Commend Bahrain for sending its Special Forces contingent to Afghanistan in support of OEF, hosting and participating in Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise Leading Edge in October, and formally joining the regional coalition naval task forces.

-- Identify steps Bahrain can take to support our Iraq policy, both politically and in practical terms.

-- Pledge to continue the close coordination between our two countries on Iran.

-- Congratulate Bahrain for holding parliamentary and municipal elections in November/December and for the participation of all registered political societies, including oppositionists, in the elections.

Issues Background Briefs

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Military Relations

¶5. (SBU) The U.S. Navy has worked closely with Bahrain for more than 50 years. When the U.S. Fifth Fleet was re-commissioned in 1995, Bahrain took the then-controversial step of being the first Gulf state to provide host government support for regionally "home-ported" U.S. Navy forces, and Bahrain remains the only country in the region which hosts a permanent component command headquarters. NAVCENT directs naval operations in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Aden in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, CJTF Horn of Africa, as well as Maritime Interception Operations to enable freedom of navigation and to prevent oil smuggling, piracy and various other operations in support of the Global War on Terrorism.

¶6. (C) Bahrain's relatively stable and secure political environment allows deployed U.S. Navy ships to stop, replenish supplies, and provide crews much needed onshore rest and recreation opportunities. Bahrain is currently one of the U.S. Navy's busiest overseas ports. In direct support of OEF and OIF, Bahrain in 2003 deployed 1,500 troops, a tank battalion task force, and its frigate the RNBS Sabha to defend Kuwait. Bahrain also flew combat air patrols over Kuwait and Bahrain and continues to keep F-16s on 24-7 strip alert. A special operations unit embedded in a UAE contingent deployed to Afghanistan in 2005. Bahrain assigned three shore-based naval officers to work in the command post for maritime task force CTF-150, which covers the Strait of Hormuz to the Sea of Aden. For CTF-152, which covers central Gulf waters, Bahrain has provided one frigate and two corvettes. Bahrain is the only GCC country to participate in the CTFs.

¶7. (C) Bahrain has the smallest economy in the GCC and is quickly depleting a very limited petroleum reserve. We have had active FMF and IMET programs in Bahrain for several years but the FMF program in particular has declined precipitously

in recent years, from \$90 million in 2003 to a budgeted \$15 million for FY 2007. We are working closely with the Bahrainis to upgrade their early warning and air defense radar systems, an initiative that has been promoted in the USG-led interagency Gulf Security Dialogue. Future programs include the sale of nine Blackhawk helicopters to the Bahraini Air Force (\$200 million) and six Bell helicopters to the Ministry of Interior (\$50 million).

Next Steps on Iraq

18. (C) The GOB publicly supports U.S. operations in Iraq, but as King Hamad and Crown Prince Salman have told several recent U.S. delegations, it believes Iraqi forces should be moving to the front lines in place of coalition forces. This would force Iraqis to take responsibility for their own security and put the GOI into the position of requesting assistance from its Arab neighbors, which the Bahrainis feel it has not yet done in a meaningful way. The Crown Prince has recommended that the U.S. draw down and consolidate its military footprint in Iraq to a 50,000-member rapid-reaction force based outside of major population centers. The GOB's greatest concern related to Iraq is that sectarian violence could spill over into Bahrain, which has a Shia-majority population ruled by a Sunni-controlled government. The timing and manner of Saddam's execution exacerbated sectarian tensions in Bahrain. GOB officials will support long-term measures to reduce sectarian violence while recognizing that the near-term situation in Iraq is extremely difficult.

Dealing With Iran

19. (C) The Bahraini leadership is greatly concerned about the threat posed by Iran and increased tensions between Iran and the international community. Crown Prince Salman has suggested several times that the U.S. and GCC countries hold a significant military exercise in the Gulf, which would send a strong signal to Iran. Bahrain hosted and participated in PSI exercise Leading Edge in October, and the boarding/interrogation portion took place just outside its territorial waters. NAVCENT personnel were impressed with the Bahraini Navy's professionalism and aggressiveness during the exercise. Bahrain has been an enthusiastic partner in the Gulf Security Dialogue initiative.

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10. (C) Bahrain's relationship with Iran is complex. The Bahraini leadership is united in its suspicion of Iranian intentions regarding Bahrain and often sees an Iranian hand in incidents involving Bahrain's Shia community, which comprises some two-thirds of the country's citizens. They are convinced Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons and assert its influence around the region. At the same time, Bahrain faces the reality that it must live with its large neighbor across the Gulf. Bahrain maintains "correct" but not warm diplomatic relations with Iran, with Bahraini leaders meeting with Iranian officials when they visit. Bahraini officials repeatedly assert their strong view that the international community should engage in diplomacy to deal with Iran, and not resort to a military solution. They recognize, however, that a robust military posture can facilitate diplomacy. Bahrain supports UNSCR 1737 but may be wary of implementing additional sanctions that go beyond the language of the resolution. It is not clear that the Bahraini leadership has come to grips with how it will handle efforts to ratchet up the pressure on Iran if that includes cutbacks in trade and engagement.

Return of U.S. Dependents

¶11. (C) Bahraini officials often reiterate their request that the U.S. Navy permit dependents to return to Bahrain. Crown Prince Salman, who is a graduate of the DOD Bahrain School and whose children now attend the school, is a particularly strong advocate for the everyday, people-to-people contact that is fostered by the presence of dependents. Bahraini officials may urge that you reconsider the Navy's 2004 decision removing dependents from Bahrain.

Elections

¶12. (C) Bahrain in November/December conducted its second set of parliamentary and municipal elections since the adoption of the 2002 constitution. Some 70 percent of registered voters and all political societies participated in the elections, with oppositionists winning 18 of 40 seats in the elected lower house Council of Representatives. Thirty-five of the 40 seats are held by Islamists (Sunni and Shia) and membership is marked by a stark Sunni-Shia divide. One woman, Lateefa Al Qaoud, ran unopposed and is Bahrain's first female elected member of parliament. Local election monitors have not yet released their findings, but the elections are seen as a major step forward in the King's democratic reform program.

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